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Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye to declare state of emergency

**Toxic plume began moving down San Juan through reservation on Saturday**

*By Noel Lyn Smith The Daily Times*

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FARMINGTON — Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye will declare a state of emergency in response to the widespread impact of toxic metals now flowing into the San Juan River via the Animas River.

Begaye, along with tribal Vice President Jonathan Nez and Navajo Nation Council Speaker LoRenzo Bates, confirmed Saturday evening that the plume containing toxic metals that was released into the Animas River this week from a mine near Silverton, Colo., is traveling through the reservation.

A precautionary warning was issued on Friday, advising residents to stay away from the river and to refrain from using its water for livestock and other household needs.

The warning also stated that communities along the San Juan receive drinking water from the city of Farmington, so it is safe for consumption.

A press release from the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority stated that the utility's water systems from Farmington to Beclabito are not impacted because the systems are fed by a different system isolated from the San Juan.

As a precautionary measure, NTUA shut down the water treatment facility in Mexican Hat, Utah.

This facility serves the community of Halchita, Utah, and will remain out of operation until NTUA receives clearance from monitoring agencies because the facility draws and treats water from the San Juan.

Meanwhile, NTUA's Kayenta District is refilling the community's water tank, and customers are asked to minimize their water usage, according to the release.

Begaye and Nez attended a Saturday meeting in Shiprock, where they shared information with residents and listened to concerns.

In a telephone interview, Begaye said he directed Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch to assemble a legal team to file a lawsuit against the EPA.

"They are impacting the livelihood of our people," he said.

He added that he remains disappointed with the EPA's lack of information and disclosure about the types of toxic metals that were discharged into the Animas and San Juan rivers. Without that information, tribal officials cannot prepare and inform the people, he said.

In a telephone conference call with reporters, EPA officials said they are posting information on the agency's website when it becomes available but declined to identify the types of metals released because testing of samples is ongoing.

Jared Blumenfeld, EPA regional administrator for Region 9, said the plume began flowing through the Navajo Nation on Saturday. Blumenfeld said the EPA has been in contact with Begaye and Donald Benn, executive director of the Navajo Nation EPA. He added that samples continue to be collected from the San Juan, and two agency staff members are working with the tribe.

Nez said a separate telephone conference with the EPA included congressional staff members, but there still was no information about the toxic metals.

"We're trying to keep (the EPA) accountable," Nez said, adding that agency officials continue to state that they are waiting for results.

"We want that information," he said.

Bates, who represents a majority of the chapters located along the San Juan, said residents continue to ask questions about drinking water safety, river access, water for livestock and crops, and the possibility of compensation for failed crops.

With irrigation canals shut off, many farmers are concerned about their next step, Bates said.

"If these farmers don't get water in the next week, they'll lose their crops," he said.

According to a press release from the Speaker's Office, the council is scheduled to receive an update from emergency management officials at 2 p.m. Monday in the council chamber in Window Rock, Ariz.

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